



Neighborhood Budget Meeting

Posted by [Pierluigi Oliverio](#) on Monday, January 26, 2009

On Saturday, City Manager Debra Figone and Mayor Chuck Reed hosted 100 neighborhood residents at City Hall for a discussion and group exercise on how to balance the city's budget and eliminate the \$65 million dollar deficit.

The residents who attended represented a large geographic portion of the city. They were both young and old, male and female and represented a wide ethnic diversity. In addition, the residents came from a variety of occupations including private sector and public sector union members.

After welcoming remarks from the city manager and mayor, a facilitator took over and gave everyone an overview. Before the exercise was to begin, the facilitator asked the planning director, police chief, director of parks and director of transportation to give an overview of their departments and the services provided. Questions from the audience followed.

The group exercise lasted for over an hour. Residents working in teams were given alternatives via colored cards representing different services, etc., that could be cut to help reduce the deficit. Anything from reducing the rate of growth in personnel costs, postponing the opening of new libraries and community centers, holding off hiring new police officers, and eliminating school crossing guards. There were also revenue enhancement options, like a one-quarter-cent sales tax that would require voter approval, increased cost of parking in city garages, restructured leases with non-profits on city property, increasing parking citation fees, etc.

The groups engaged each other in considering the pros and cons of each idea. One group made a pile that consisted of "absolutely no," and an "absolutely yes" pile, and then a large "maybe" pile to help them get started. Some groups talked about what they liked about their neighborhood and city today before starting the process.

Some groups reached quick consensus while others had long discussions on the impact of choices. There were blank cards available where the residents were able to register their own cost-cutting ideas or revenue-generating ideas. The city manager and the specific department head would review the ideas and if doable would sign off on them. If not possible at all (such as a suggestion to raise gas taxes) then the idea would not be signed off.

If groups needed more information about a specific choice they would put up a red sheet and the department head would answer the question and in many cases the budget director was able to provide dollar figures for the new idea.

I observed from start to finish, roaming around and listening in on the dialogue. Credit goes to Mayor Reed for proposing this idea of neighborhood budget meeting, which is now in its third year. Residents that had participated in the last two years thought this one was the best. A resident from Evergreen said that interaction was great and the high level of choices made it engaging. I agree that the exercise was positive and believe as we continue to have residents sharing their views it will continue to be better each year.

Out of the 10 groups that participated, only one group did not balance the budget, with only \$62 million in savings. However, they did not raise taxes. Several groups exceeded the goal and went as high as \$75 million, which is likely to be the actual deficit come June. When they could not agree with a choice they would vote the idea up or down and move on. The groups worked well together as they understood the seriousness of the current recession.

After the group exercise there was a group discussion to share feedback on the exercise and what happened at each table. Here are some of the comments from the table captains in no specific order that were shared to the group at large:

- Make aggressive wage cuts.
- Everyone needs to sacrifice.
- Hire a full-time person just to do grant writing.
- Don't cut crime prevention and gang intervention.
- Reduce benefits packages for city employees.
- Salary freeze for anyone making over 100K, like Obama's staff.
- Have DOT parking staff give out tickets and have cars towed instead of police in neighborhoods.
- If you want to propose a new program or building, come up with the money to fund it ongoing or don't propose it.
- Use furloughs to save money and not do lay-offs

- Outsource street landscape maintenance.
- Use contractors instead of employees.
- Don't allow retirees to come back and work as consultants while they get paid their pension.
- Nightclubs should cover police costs.
- Focus more on economic development.

One resident said that it is easier for her to make these decisions as a resident since there is no political backlash. Another resident said the elephant in the room is the public employee unions and that we're not fixing the real problem of our expenses being too high.

The residents' feedback and new ideas from the neighborhood budget meeting will be discussed at a Feb. 13 city council study session. In addition, a phone survey asking even more residents across the City about their budget priorities will be available in the next few weeks.

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